

SEVEN TRENDS SHAPING THE INTERACTIVE AGE

INTERESTING TIMES

"May you live in interesting times!" is reputed to be the epithet hurled at a foe when other insults have failed. It reflects the understanding that "interesting times" meant difficult times, full of change, challenge, and perhaps opportunity. Indeed, this curse is upon us!. We are living in interesting times, and we will very likely stay in interesting times for many years. The word "interesting" is itself fascinating, because it comes from two Latin roots: *inter* and *est*. *Inter* means between; *est* is to be. So, "interesting" is between states of being, which is exactly where we are.

We are in the period of time that marks the transition from the industrial age to the interactive age. The raw materials of the industrial age were the materials of the earth and energy combined together with our ingenuity to create new tools and products. The raw materials of the interactive age are information, in all of its forms, coupled once again with our innate ingenuity, and the technologies of the industrial age that speed our interaction with each other throughout the world.

BETWEEN STATES OF BEING

This is a period of great change. This shift from the industrial age to the interactive age affects not only businesses. It affects our social, political, economic, and scientific institutions as well. Institutions in all of these areas are struggling, buffeted by the winds of change.

No one is safe. These changes will eventually affect everyone. The transition from the agricultural to the industrial age took about 50 years to affect most people in western Europe and North America. At this time we are about 25 years into the current transition. This means that the professional lives of everyone will be filled with change and chaos. Our life's work will be to shape the transition, and transform ourselves and our institutions to prosper in the interactive age.

There is no doubt that the pace of work has increased. We each have more things to keep up with, to consider, to interact with, and to make decisions about. Because organizations are now operating with fewer people, stress has increased, not only among those that have been displaced by the shifting nature of work, but also among those left to do the work with.

The current information base and the technologies of the industrial age are attacking only portions of the problems of work. It's like automating only a portion of a manufacturing line. All the other functions of the line must work faster and longer to feed or respond to the automated portion. Our information based technologies, as powerful as they are, are only pale imitations of what is to come.

We are finding ourselves disenchanted with our institutions and our leaders, frustrated with our work, and depressed over what we have had to give up. Our dreams of what our future was to be, die hard. We see clearly what we have to give up from our past as we are discovering what our present really is like. However, we cannot yet see what our future will be. Many of us have taken all of this change personally, instead of

understanding the global context in which all of this change is occurring.

SEVEN TRENDS OF THE INTERACTIVE AGE

While the glass through which we view our future may today be cloudy, there are seven trends to understand that will help us prepare for our future.

1. THE EMERGENCE OF THE GLOBAL MARKET

In the global market, customers, competitors and/or technology can come from any place in the world. And, the driving forces for change can emanate from anywhere in the world. Our current state of regional trading blocs is a natural transition stage before we have a truly global economy. We must learn how to crawl before we learn how to walk. The reemergence of tribal, ethnic religious, or nationalistic upheaval reflects the actions of those most fearful of the changes underway.

In this environment, it is important for businesses to have the glocal vantage point. Glocal is a combination of global and local. It is this simultaneous perspective that will enable business to clearly see the change underway and make decisions important to their future.

2. INCREASE IN ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

This is a trend obvious to almost everyone, but it bears repeating because it is so important. Because of the accelerating pace of work at a global level with increased global competition, electronic communication is essential. As more and more of our past becomes available on-line, we will be able to easily interact with it to gain insights into our present. And, we are able to interact with many potential futures to determine the implications for our present. The results of our work can be shared with others throughout the world quickly, and they will in turn build on what we have done.

One of the many implications of this trend is that it will become increasingly difficult for institutions to keep secrets. For businesses, one of the large implications is the changing nature of advertising. Marketing and sales approaches will change as purchasers base their decisions on information about the products and services available from a variety of sources, not solely on an image created by advertising. Early stages of this are evident in the Home Pages being developed on the World Wide Web. They create an interactive Internet marketing presence that allows the provider of the goods or service to supply an enormous amount of information economically. It also allows the provider to obtain information about the number of accesses made and the type of institutions accessing the Home Page. Other examples are the availability of results of government or special interest group sponsored product tests via data bases accessible over the Internet.

3. THE REENGINEERING OF ORGANIZATIONS

We will continue to see the restructuring of organizations. This attempt to reengineer the work of the organization is made possible by the new technologies of the interactive age. A continued focus on the core competencies of an organization is a natural outgrowth. And, the general dictum being used for organizations is: "If you aren't an expert in it, then don't do it." As a result, many organizations are outsourcing more and more of what they do. The danger is that many mistakes will be made in the determination of "core competencies."

The outsourcing of functions by organizations increases the amount of interaction necessary for the organization to operate properly. It also increases the difficulty of those interactions for they can take place with vendors based in different cultures and political systems. The previously not so obvious impact is that

organizations and the people running them must increase their interactivity. And, thus far, reengineering has caused just the opposite -- companies have closed in upon themselves.

4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Distance learning encompasses a group of highly interactive technologies, products and services that enable people to get the education, training and information they need, when they need it, at the place and time that they want it. It is the educational equivalent of the "just in time" manufacturing processes. It is "just in time" education, focused on the user (the learner), not the teacher.

Books are a form of distance learning. The writer, the teacher, writes the book that is disseminated widely. People who need information buy a book and read it at their convenience when they need the learnings. The electronic equivalent of the book is the compact disk. It can handle much more information than a book, and be interactive as well. And, the information is more accessible to the learner and more teaching can be incorporated into the program.

Businesses will be investing more and more into personal performance support systems for their employees. As we have invested in capital to improve the productivity of the farmers and the production workers, so will we invest in tools that will increase the productivity of the workers in the interactive age. The development of Telematics will increase the need for programming at an accelerating rate. All forms of education and training will be delivered through these systems.

5. THE COMPLETION OF THE INTEGRATION OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES INTO WORK

Organizations are at various stages of the integration of interactive information based technologies into the work environment. Some, who began years ago, are in the last stages of the process. Others are just beginning. Even others have yet to start. The process of integration goes through four stages.

The total cost for this process roughly doubles with each stage. The last two stages include education and training, experience, and collaboration with others that will enable the worker to think about work in totally different light resulting in new approaches and concepts. In the last stage, where the real gains in productivity will be seen, people will be asked to make a personal transformation in their perception and implementation of their work. And, this explains why, overall, there has been to date a disappointing improvement in productivity. Another reason for companies' disappointment in productivity increases is their impatience. It takes a minimum of 8-10 years for each person to progress through all four stages. And because people do not go lock-step all at once through this four stage transition, most organizations are not there yet.

6. THE RE-EMERGENCE OF VALUES

Because of all the interaction possible, the amount of information accessible to individuals, all the restructuring of organizations and work, and the personal transformations of individuals, values will emerge as critical ingredients in organizational life. It is the values that will guide the decisions that individuals in organizations at all levels will use to guide them through the chaos. Values for organizations will be in three categories -- ethics, quality and vitality.

Many organizations that have flattened their hierarchy, and reduced staff, instead of giving people more freedom of action, have in general restricted actions using the information technologies to control rather than free. It is an attempt to use the information based technologies to reinforce the industrial age model of organizations. This is a total misuse of the technology and the people. It is understandable because the executives of these organizations know the potential of the technology, but fear the loss of control that will result. They fear that people in the organizations do not have the knowledge, capabilities, and values that will

enable them to make appropriate decisions. And, most of all they fear the loss of power over those individuals. This fear has caused a crisis in leadership.

Values can, and will be developed in organizations that allow its employees to be ennobled, enabled, empowered and encouraged to act independently, utilizing their ingenuity to help the organization and themselves fulfill their purpose. True leaders of organizations will be responsible for values development.

7. THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

We will increasingly ask ourselves the question throughout this chaotic transition, "Why do we work?" We, as individuals and as organizations, are in the process of discovering our unfolding purpose in life. When we have reformulated our purpose as individuals, organizations, institutions and countries, we will then move to the next stage in our development and reap the benefits of 50 years of transformation.

AUTHORS

Donna Prestwood and Paul Schumann are cofounders of Glocal Vantage, Inc., a business and economic development consulting firm.

GLOCAL VANTAGE, INC., PO BOX 26947, AUSTIN, TX 78755-0947 USA
(512) 302-1935
WWW.GLOCALVANTAGE.COM
INFO@GLOCALVANTAGE.COM
